



Date: April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
To: House Committee on Education  
From: Jennifer Parrish Taylor, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Urban League of Portland  
Re: Support for Literacy Reform, HB 3198 with -3 amendments

Chair Neron, Vice-Chairs Hudson and Wright, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jennifer Parrish Taylor, I am the Director of Advocacy and Public Policy as the Urban League and I am submitting this testimony in support of HB 3198. The Urban League of Portland is one of Oregon's oldest civil rights and social service organizations, empowering African Americans and others to achieve equality in education, employment, health, economic security, and quality of life across Oregon and SW Washington.

Literacy is a basic civil right. We live in a complex information age that requires literacy for success. The ability to read and read well is the difference between being able to participate fully in society or living at the margins. Today, fewer than 40 percent of Oregon's third graders can read at grade level and according to "the Oregon Department of Education's 2018-2019 Oregon Statewide Annual Report Card, for the Oregon 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading rates, only 26 percent of Black learners are being taught to read."<sup>1</sup> For students in under-resourced schools, students of color, students with disabilities, and bilingual students, the numbers are worse. "To get a sense of where students were in the fall of 2021, Portland used a well-regarded national test. It uncovered yawning racial gaps. The results showed the staggering racial divide in Portland's public school system. The test showed Black and Latino elementary and middle school students were consistently at least a full year, and in some cases three or four years, behind grade-level expectations. Scores on the test revealed that white students were the only racial or ethnic student group in Portland Public Schools whose average test scores hit or exceeded grade-level benchmarks in reading and math across grades three through eight. Black fourth-graders, on average, were barely reading at a third-grade level, according to nationally benchmarked figures from Portland-based Northwest Evaluation Association, which makes the Measures of Academic Progress tests. The average Latino fourth-grader was also a year behind. The findings were especially concerning, the district's new chief of research, assessment and accountability, Renard Adams said, because those disparities would likely compound as students grew older. Black eighth-graders in Portland Public Schools, on average, read at about the level they should be in the fall of sixth grade, he said. Latino students, meanwhile, consistently tested about a year behind in reading, according to the analysis."<sup>2</sup>

Starting in early childhood, reading is a crucial entry point for future learning and is essential for full participation in civic life. For generations, children of color and children with disabilities, primarily Black, Brown, and Indigenous, have been the subjects and objects of educational research and innovations that operate with the core guiding principle that they are a problem to be fixed. The kids are not the problem. The problem is the fundamental inequities and lack of accountability baked into our educational system. It's time for Oregon's educational system to rise to the moment. Our kids and our teachers deserve better.

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<sup>1</sup> Oregon Department of Education, Oregon Statewide Report Card, 2018-2019, pg. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Oregonian, Left Behind: Portland's Black and Latino Students Shortchanged from the Earliest Grades, Belying Pledge to Put them First, 2022.



We can successfully teach Oregon's kids to read. Teaching kids to read can't be left to chance. Research shows *95 percent of children can learn to read*, given clear, systematic, structured instruction. With tools grounded in proven, evidence-based practices in the science of reading, we can improve literacy outcomes for Oregon's children.

To achieve the shared vision of improving literacy across Oregon, we call for amendments to [House Bill 3198](#) that would:

- **Center students who struggle the most with reading.** Instead of a grant application process for districts, funds and resources should be specifically and explicitly dedicated to schools with the highest numbers of struggling readers, administered and directed by the Oregon Department of Education.
- **The monitoring of early literacy success plans must ensure that we do not over-emphasize standardized testing or rigid academic scores at the sacrifice of student's learning and love of reading.** There is no silver bullet here, however, if our state takes a direction toward more investment and resourcing in our public education system, we know better outcomes will follow.
- **Ensure the instruction and tools that children need to succeed are grounded in evidence-based research about reading:** For example, a governor-appointed task force could vet specific assessments, curricula, teacher training, and other resources.
- **Ensure our 197 school districts have what they need to support teachers and all students in an equitable way:** Intensive, high-dosage tutoring helps struggling readers immediately, while teacher training is a long-term investment in our educators that pays dividends for generations. Both should be prioritized for funding by policymakers and coordinated by the state education department to ensure accountability.

Let's make Oregon a literacy leader. Background, zip code, life circumstances or the language a child speaks at home shouldn't determine if they are taught to read. Dual language abilities are strengths, not deficits. To change literacy outcomes for Oregon's kids, whoever they are and wherever they live, the system needs to change. On behalf of every Oregon child who struggles with reading, we deeply appreciate policymakers' commitment to literacy. We are grateful for your openness to learn from us and others, to help all students fulfill their potential. Literacy is liberation - and reading is for everybody. We urge you to support House Bill 3198.

Respectfully,

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